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ABSTRACT

Between 1978 and 1983, Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) undertook a comprehensive reform of its educational program in order to permit the continuation of the open door, while strengthening expectations and increasing the educational achievement of its graduates. Elements of the reform included the reinstatement of a placement testing program; the establishment of Standards of Academic Progress to monitor student performance and control credit load; and the implementation of student information systems to provide individualized feedback on mid-term academic performance and progress toward meeting graduation requirements. One measure of the effects of these reforms is graduate achievement on the College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST), which since fall 1982 has been a condition for proceeding to the junior year in Florida's state universities. Results of the 1983 CLAST administration show that MDCC graduates had a mean score in computation higher than that of 25 of the other 27 community colleges and 6 of 9 universities, despite the fact that 50% of the entering MDCC students were found to be deficient in mathematics. Another measure of the impact of the educational reforms is graduation and re-enrollment rates, which experienced a sharp decline immediately after the reforms were implemented, but have since fully recovered. A final impact measure is the virtually unanimous response of faculty, staff, and students in favor of more rigorous standards. (LAL)

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A Status Report on the Comprehensive Educational Reform of Miami-Dade Community College

by Robert H. McCabe, President, Miami-Dade Community College

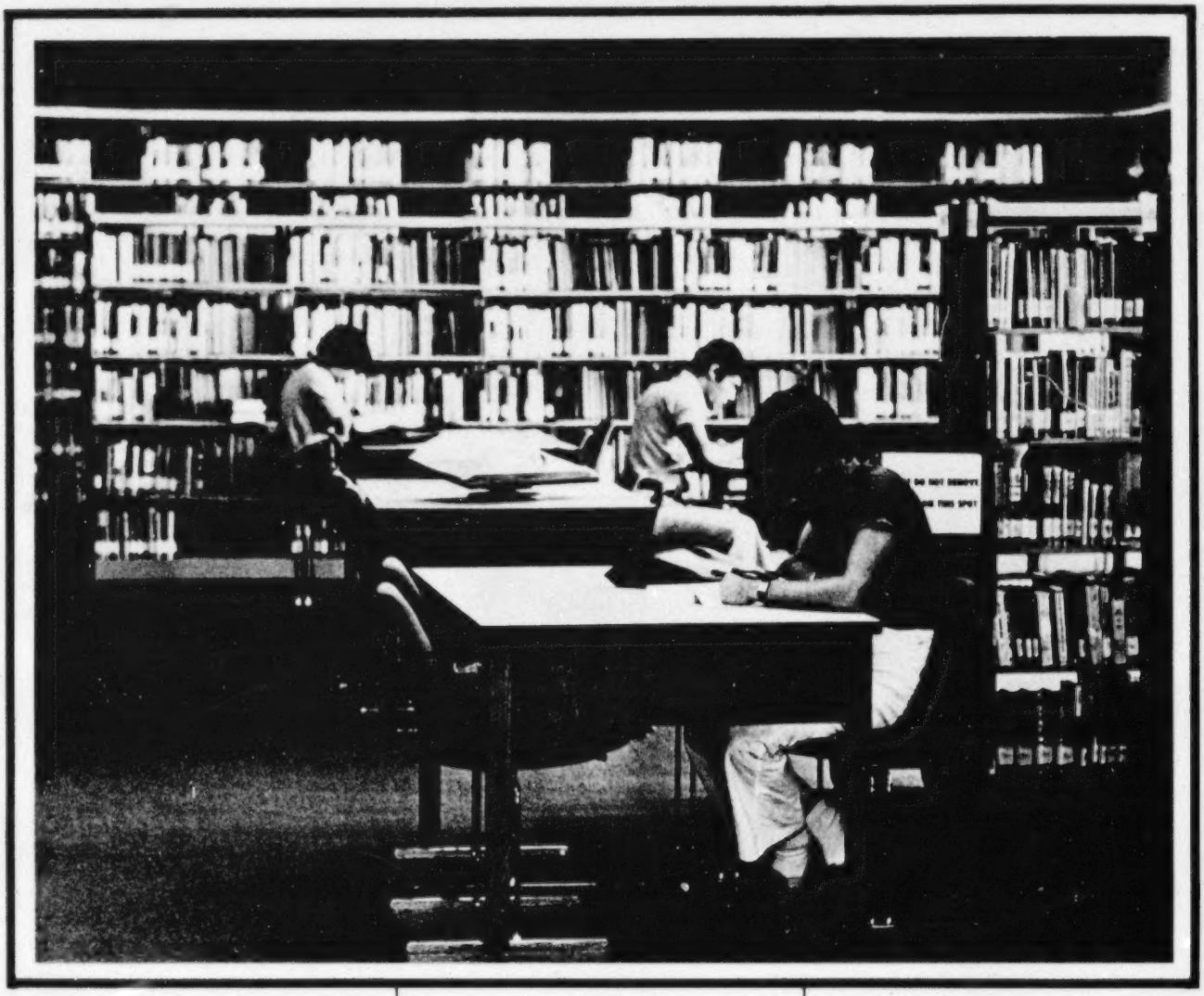
In 1978, after three years of planning, Miami-Dade Community College announced that it would embark on a course of comprehensive educational reform, in order to better meet the needs of our changing society. While we were concerned with the magnitude of the reform which was required, we were encouraged by the supportive response from the Dade County community. Currently, Governor Graham and other state leaders are spearheading efforts for statewide educational upgrading, and Miami-Dade is initiating major new components of reform. Therefore, it is particularly important at this time to report to our community on the progress made to date.

Data are now available concerning several elements of the reform, including the results of a longitudinal study that compared the performance of students who began their work prior to the reform with those who began after implementation of the reform was underway. The results are positive and confirm the accuracy of the new direction taken by the College. A summary of the program reform, research concerning several components, and the results of the longitudinal study follows.

OVERVIEW

Miami-Dade Community College is deeply committed to serve all the people of our community while maintaining the highest standards to guarantee quality educational programs that residents, business, and industry require. It is especially important in this community that there be a broad base of well-educated individuals to match the requirement of information-age industry. In education, excellence must be the goal for individuals who seek to improve themselves. The population served by the College, which has changed markedly over the past decade, is unique in the state of Florida: the majority of students on each of Miami-Dade's four campuses are Hispanic; there are significant numbers of refugees representing more than ten nations; the number of students with low incomes is so large that one of every 200 Pell Grants (Federal student grants based on financial need) issued in the U.S. goes to a Miami-Dade student; the College has the largest enrollment of foreign (student visa) students of any college or university in the nation; and less than half of the students report that their native language is English. The College has twice the black freshman and sophomore enrollment of Florida A & M, and more minority freshman and sophomore students than all of the state universities or all of the other community colleges in the state. These factors are combined, of course, with other conditions typical of urban America.

Over recent years, changes in society and the workplace have rapidly increased the academic skills required for most occupations. At the same time, the academic skills of Americans have declined dramatically. While Miami-Dade continues to attract many very good students, the academic skills of a large percentage of entering students are substantially deficient, especially in English. Thus, during a study of general education that began in 1975, it became clear that the College could only hope to assist the majority of students to attain the high level of academic



achievement needed to fulfill their occupational goals by drastically changing the open-flow "right to fail" educational model that was predominant in community colleges to a far more directive, more supportive, and more demanding program.

Miami-Dade began the systematic reform of its total educational program in 1978, and the last of the originally-planned components were implemented in 1982-83. The goal of these comprehensive reforms was to permit continuation of the open door together with the strengthening of expectations and increased educational achievement of our graduates.

ELEMENTS OF REFORM

The new program is more directive, with far greater controls, as well as provision for early and continued assistance for students experiencing academic difficulty. It raises expectations for student performance, focuses on quality and academic achievement, and provides increased feedback and personal and instructional support for those requiring assistance as they progress through the educational program. The College commitment to focus on the individual has required imaginative use of new communications technology, and the development of computerized information systems to serve as the fundamental vehicle to monitor individual performance and progress.

Placement Testing. As part of this new approach, Miami-Dade reinstated placement testing by using the Comparative Guidance and Placement (CGP) test in reading, writing, and computation effective Spring Term 1978-79. The testing was initiated on a gradual basis and was fully implemented by the Fall of 1981-82. First-time-in-college students carrying nine credits, students having earned 15 college credits or more, and students wishing to enroll in any math or English course are required to be tested. For those whose native language is not sufficiently developed to allow them to take the CGP, the English Placement Test is used as a substitute examination. If the results of these tests show that students are weak in any of the basic skills areas, they are required to take developmental courses and restricted in other coursework and load. The impact of the testing program has been positive, permitting advisors and counselors

to work with students in a more informed manner regarding their skill levels so that effective placement can be achieved. Studies indicate that both students and faculty view positively the reinstatement of this important assessment program.

Standards of Academic Progress. Under the Standards of Academic Progress, student performance is monitored and credit load controlled from the point at which seven credits have been completed. This program provides a system of warning, probation, and finally suspension of students from the institution because of low grade point average or excessive withdrawals from classes. During the past five years, Miami-Dade has suspended over 13,000 students under the Standards of Academic Progress. Suspension is, in effect, the College's decision to inform non-achieving students that there is no further help we can provide, and that society has, through this institution, made full effort on their behalf.

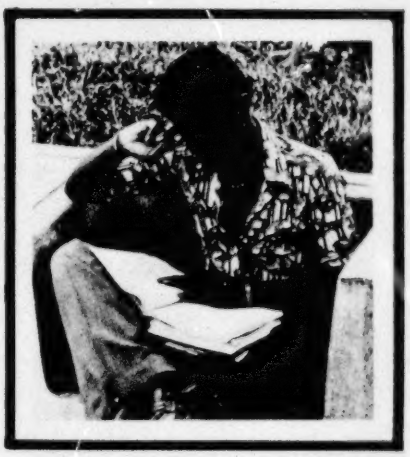
A recently-completed study clearly associates the Standards of Academic Progress with improved academic performance on the part of students. The suspension rate has declined each term for the last four terms and, based on studies of the pool of students eligible for suspension, there is evidence that this decline is due to improved performance rather than students leaving the College. There is evidence that the load restrictions and other supportive measures are having the intended impact. Most importantly, however, the College has effectively communicated to students that higher expectations are in place and, as a result, students are performing at a higher level in order to continue at the College. Although the Standards of Academic Progress represented a drastic change of policy at Miami-Dade, students have been very supportive. It is clear that they want to take pride in their achievements and to know that they are making significant gains with the time invested.

Student Information Systems. Prior to students being suspended from Miami-Dade Community College, those who fail to meet minimum requirements are advised and given personalized assistance. In addition, other special intervention programs and credit limitations are prescribed for future terms in order to improve student performance. New academic support programs now aid in the diagnosis of weaknesses and the prescription of review activities. Through the computerized Academic Alert System, all students receive individualized information about their current academic progress approximately six weeks into each term. In a survey, 93 percent of our students expressed appreciation at receiving this personal computerized information while there is still time to take corrective action. In addition, faculty indicate satisfaction with this process which encourages earlier classroom assessment and decision-making.

The Advisement and Graduation Information System informs students of the progress they are making toward completing the requirements of a specific program of study, checks for graduation certification by identifying completed courses and currently-enrolled courses, and suggests courses required for smooth transfer to an upper-division university. This system fully utilizes the College's automated record system to provide up-to-the-minute graduation and transfer data, and other important information for the improvement of academic advisement.

Intervention. Early assistance and more direction for those experiencing difficulty help students to improve performance. An early study showed that when 4,171 students were alerted to improve performance (through Academic Alert) in the fall of 1980, 82 percent were able to improve so as to avoid being placed on "academic warning" at the end of the term. Further, a study of 624 South Campus students who were experiencing academic difficulty showed that those who took advantage of assistance, in the form of a course dealing with study skills, time management and personal goals, showed marked improvement in performance. The grade point average (GPA) of these students (0-4 scale) increased by .88, while those not availing themselves of the additional services had further GPA decline of .44. In the same study, those students availing themselves of additional assistance had an increase of 74 percent in successful course-completion rate, while the others declined further. The improvements were consistent for all ethnic groups.

Over the period of three years, the percentage of students performing satisfactorily in all courses at midterm has increased from 45 to 52 percent. As more and more students improve their performance midway through the term, the chances are greater for improved final grades, thus avoiding possible restrictions under the Standards of Academic Progress. For example, in a comparison of two groups, 86 percent of the students who were alerted to improve their performance at the middle of the term met the required academic standards at the end of the term, in contrast to only 76 percent of those students who were not provided with any information about their progress halfway into the term.



Our data also showed such a strong positive correlation between attendance and academic performance that this could not be ignored. Faculty now maintain attendance records for all classes and attendance is one of the items reported on the Academic Alert System.

PROGRESS ON THE COLLEGE LEVEL ACADEMIC SKILLS TEST

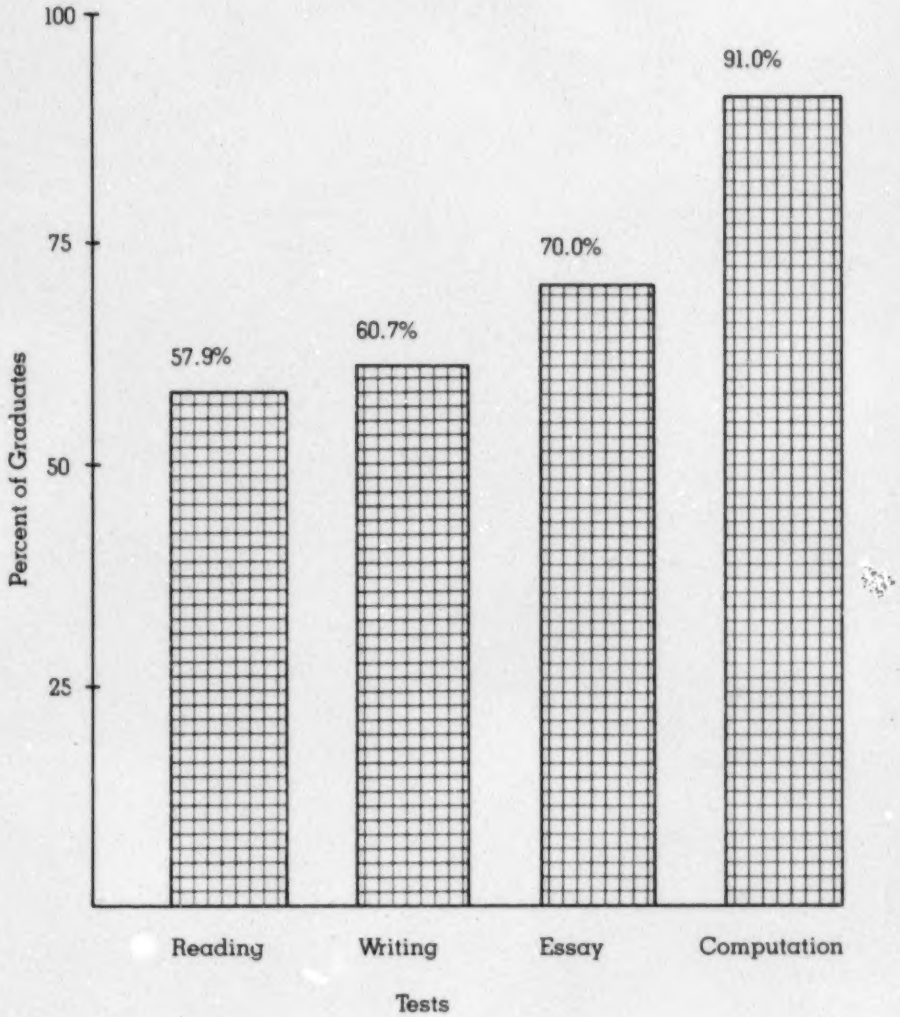
In the fall of 1982, the first College

Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST) was given in Florida as a condition for proceeding to the junior year in state universities. CLAST is required for progress to the junior year whether students begin as freshmen in universities, or transfer from community colleges. Results of the June 1983 administration of the CLAST show that Miami-Dade Community College Associate Degree graduates post high scores in computation as compared to other colleges and universities. The Miami-Dade Associate in Arts graduates had a mean score in computation higher than that of 25 of the other 27 community colleges, and six of the nine universities. These results were achieved despite the fact that approximately 50 percent of the entering students at Miami-Dade test as deficient in mathematics in the placement test administered by the College. This can be attributed to a carefully-designed and very structured curriculum and the dedicated, hard work of the mathematics faculty. The Miami-Dade results in computation are especially noteworthy, as they exceed the performance of six of the nine universities with selective admission policies, and few students who begin their studies with any academic deficiencies.

Perhaps most impressive about the CLAST examination results to date has been the strong performance of community college students as compared to university students. The difference in mean scores is relatively small and the overlap between community colleges and universities is substantial. These results are consistent with studies of transfer students which have shown that graduates of the Florida open-door community colleges compete on even terms with native university students after transfer to the upper division. The results also illustrate that the community colleges draw large numbers of very competent students in addition to those who begin with some deficiency. Miami-Dade is a substantial supplier of juniors to the State University System. If the first year of the CLAST examination is an indicator, as it should be, Miami-Dade will be supplying approximately one out of eight juniors to Florida's public universities, as that is roughly the

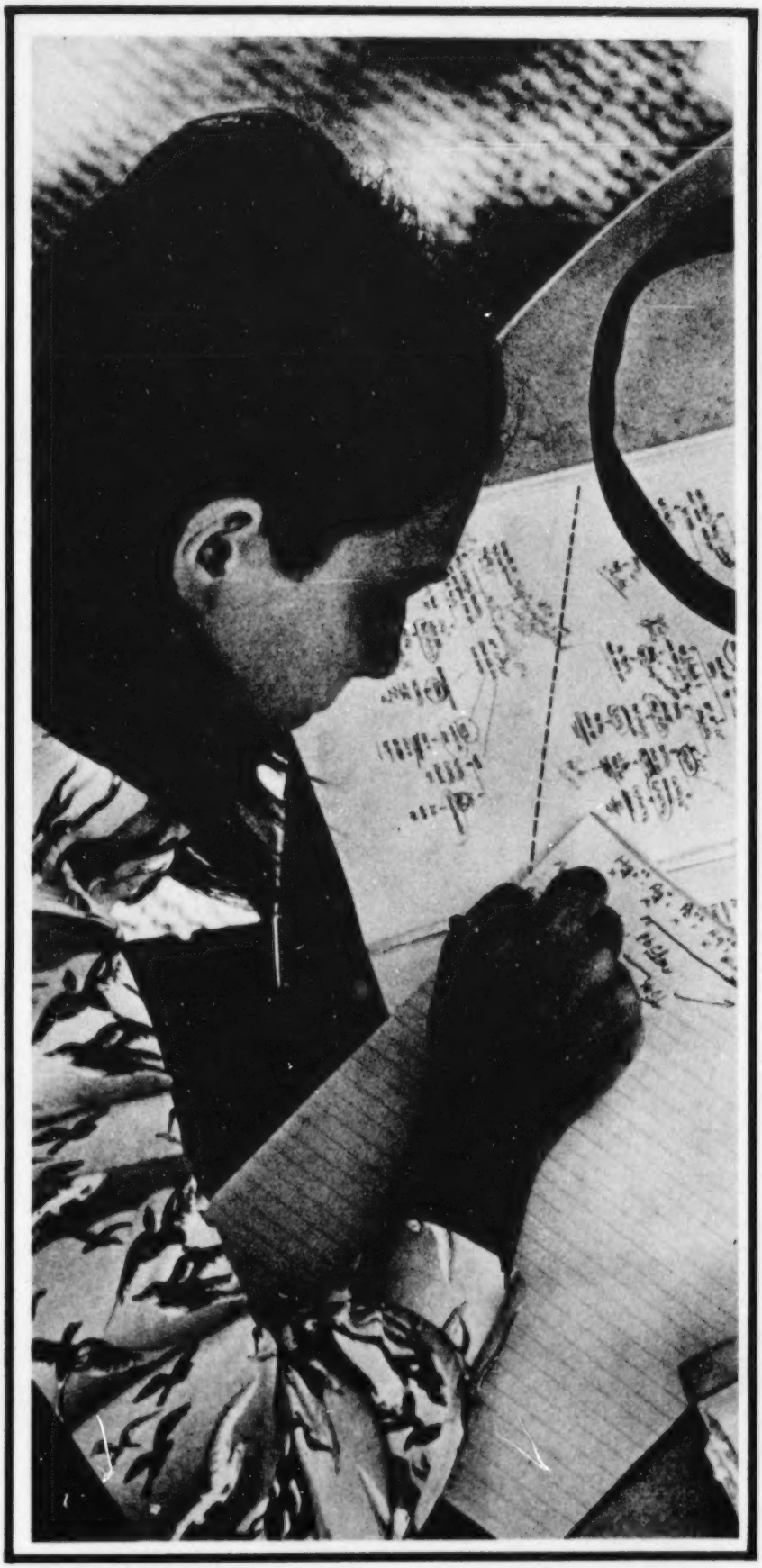
TABLE 1

Percentage of Miami-Dade Community College Associate in Arts Graduates Whose Group Mean Scores on the June 1983 CLAST Exceed the Mean Scores for the State Universities



percentage of students statewide who have taken CLAST during its first year at Miami-Dade. Further, the College's large minority population is evidenced by the fact that during these initial administrations of the CLAST, 59.6 percent of all Hispanics and 34 percent of all non-white examinees statewide were at Miami-Dade.

The volume and range of talent at the College are well-illustrated by data from the June administration of CLAST. Approximately one-eighth of all individuals tested were at Miami-Dade and, of the 1,141 A.A. graduates at the College, the top 700 had a mean on all of the tests above that of the State University System—a larger group of students with means that high than seven of the nine universities. On the computation test, the top 1,000 A.A. graduates had a mean higher than the State University System mean, and that number was only exceeded by the University of Florida. Taking the four subtests together, more than two-thirds of the Miami-Dade A.A. graduates did as well as or better than the university system students, and on computation that number was higher than 90 percent (see Table 1). The College takes special pride in noting that among these higher scoring students,



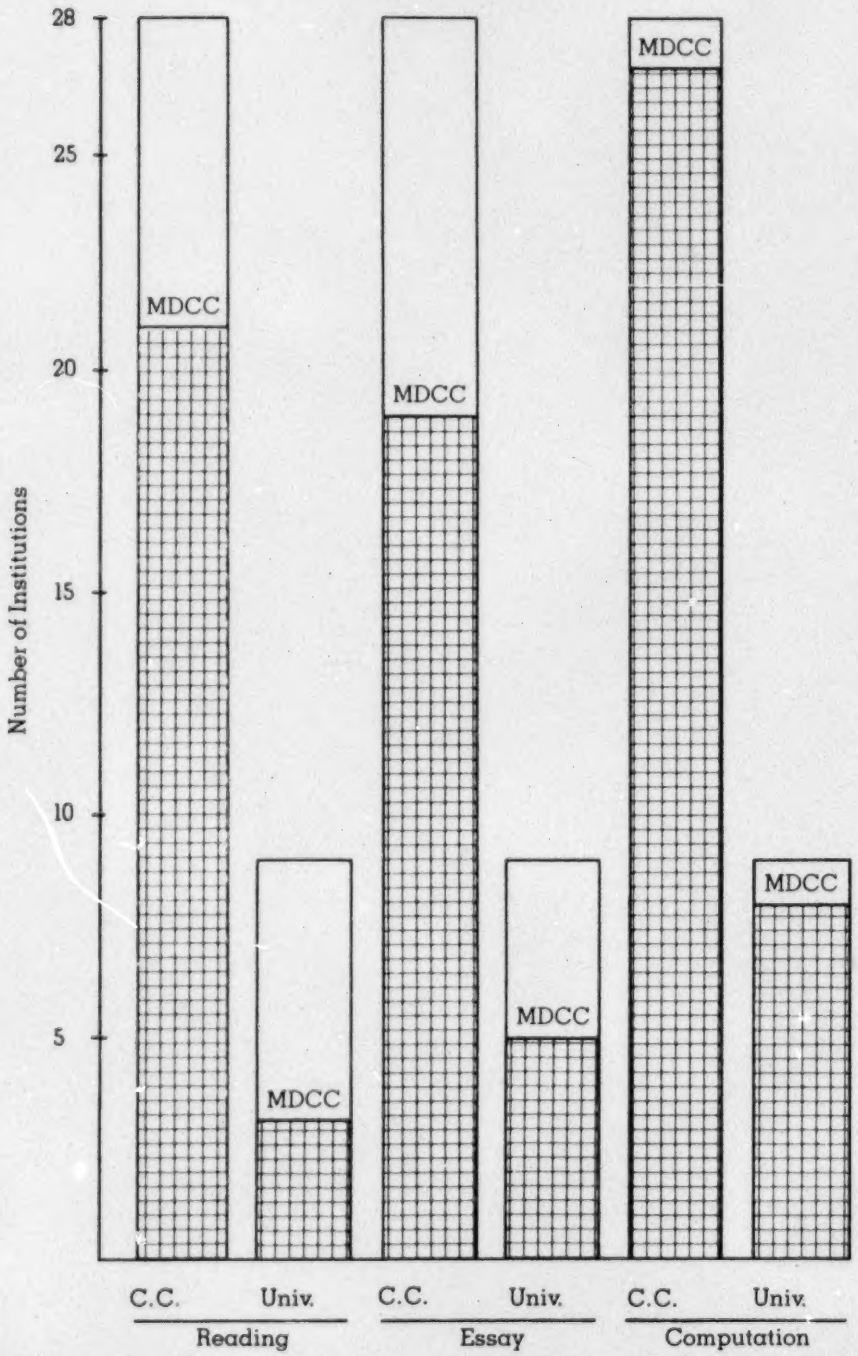
nearly 20 percent began their work with measureable academic deficiencies that required developmental coursework.

Miami-Dade's greatest problem area in the CLAST examination is communications skill. While gains are still being made, the College's student means are below the state means on the verbal portions of the test. However, Miami-Dade is undertaking significant program adjustments to improve these skills. These scores are undoubtedly related to the fact that two-thirds of the Miami-Dade Associate in Arts Degree graduates who wrote the June CLAST were ethnic minorities, with approximately half having a native language other than English. It is clear that the students whose native language is not English are at a disadvantage in the timed CLAST examination, as many are still translating from another language to English as they do their work. Thus, they do not have a fair opportunity to demonstrate their competence. In spite of this, gains have been made. Black and Hispanic graduates' scores on reading and writing have improved since the last administration of the CLAST by an average of three to five scale score points, and on the essay subtest, black graduates have had a gain in the overall mean from 3.5 to 3.9, while Hispanic graduates have improved from 3.8 to 4.1.

The performance of Miami-Dade's Associate in Arts Degree black graduates compares very favorably to black students in other colleges and universities. Their mean score is above the state-wide average for blacks in reading, computation and essay, and equals the state-wide mean for blacks in the writing test. On the computation test, M-DCC Associate in Arts Degree black graduates exceeded the black students at every university except the University of Florida, and every community college except St. Johns River Community College, which has a very small student body. On the reading and essay tests, they had a higher average score than black students at 24 other colleges and universities—higher than 21 community colleges and three universities in reading; higher than 19 community colleges and five universities on the essay (see Table 2).

TABLE 2

Rank of Miami-Dade Community College Black A.A. Graduates Compared to Black Students at Other Institutions



While the CLAST examination is only one indicator, and certainly should not be used independently to measure progress, Miami-Dade is making progress with by far the most diversified student body of any institution of higher education in Florida. The diversity and range of talent are reflected in the variations between computation and reading scores, but it is clear that if these students had the talent to score well on the computation test, with the proper preparation they can also do can also do well on the verbal portions. The problem is not a basic lack of talent, but rather a reflection of the student's earlier preparation and background. Miami-Dade provides **the** opportunity for individual progress and success afforded by a college education for more minority students than any other single institution, or most combinations of institutions in the state. An open-door institution committed to help as many students as possible to high achievement certainly has a more difficult task than institutions that only admit the academically well-prepared. However, the contributions to society represented by the gains made by those M-DCC students who begin with deficiencies are probably the most important of any higher education institution in Florida.

EARLY SUCCESSFUL RESULTS

When Miami-Dade's educational program reform was undertaken, we were seriously concerned that the impact on minorities might be detrimental. However, results from our first longitudinal study are consistent for all of the campuses and indicate that this is not the case. As part of the study, students in four cohorts (groups) were examined three years after admission to determine whether they were still enrolled or had graduated. The 1976 group was the last one not impacted by any of the reforms; the 1977 group was given one year's "grace" before being impacted by the Standards of Academic Progress and other 1978 reforms; and the 1978 and 1979 groups were impacted immediately upon enrollment. Table 3 illustrates the similarity of trends in the campus data (Medical Center not reported separately). In all cases the graduation rates declined after the reforms were implemented, but recovered fully and were slightly ahead of the rates prior to the reform. For black students the initial decline was more dramatic. Most impressively, however, the gains of this group after the reforms were very substantial. The black students entering in 1979 showed a 25 percent increase in the three-year graduation rate over those entering in 1976, and in fact had a higher

TABLE 3

Three-Year Graduation Rate
First-time-in College Students
Fall 1976, 1977, 1978, and 1979

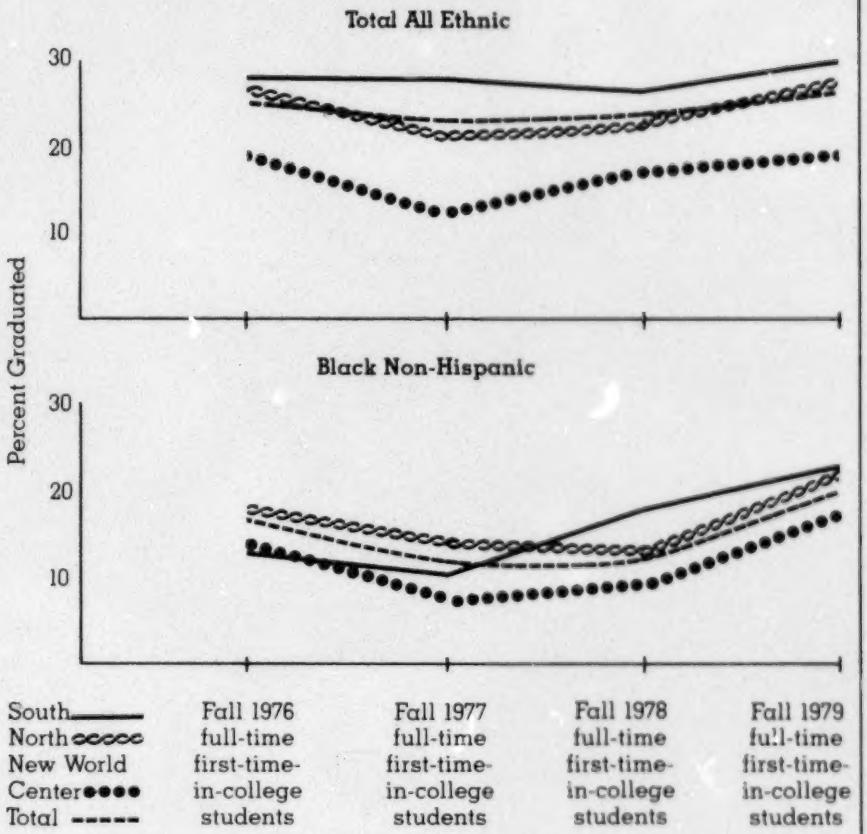
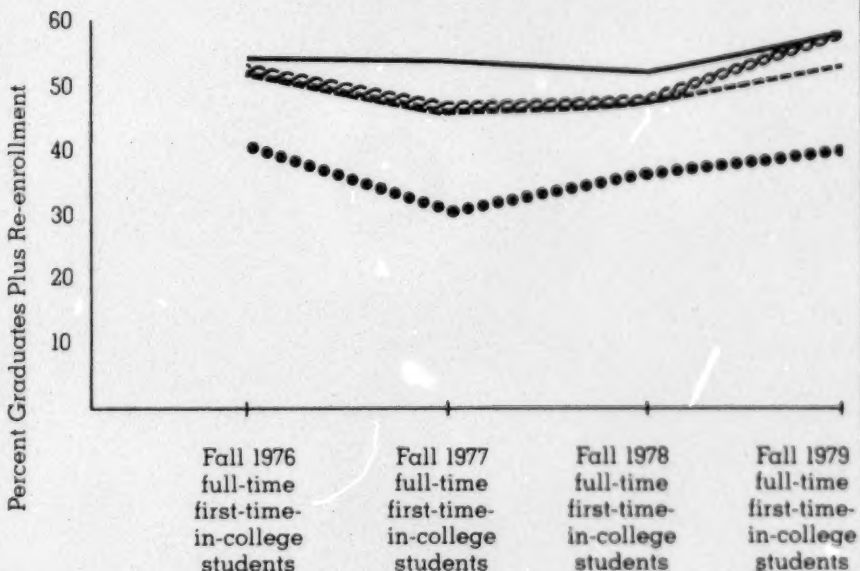


TABLE 4

Total All Ethnic Three-Year
Graduation Plus Re-enrollment Rate
First-time-in-College Students
Fall 1976, 1977, 1978, and 1979



graduation rate by 1982 (after three years and one term) than the 1976 group showed in a full six-year period.

Table 4 shows the combined graduation and re-enrollment rate for the total student population, and Table 5 provides this for black students. These tables again illustrate a pattern of initial decline followed by full recovery, with the impact being more dramatic for black students. The combination of re-enrollment and graduation rate for black students had increased by 10 percent, and black graduation rates had increased by 25 percent for the 1979 group over the pre-reform 1976 group. Perhaps most impressive is that 13,000 students had been suspended during this period of time and these suspensions are absorbed in the data presented here. It appears reasonable to conclude from the results of these studies that the educational reform has begun to have the desired results.

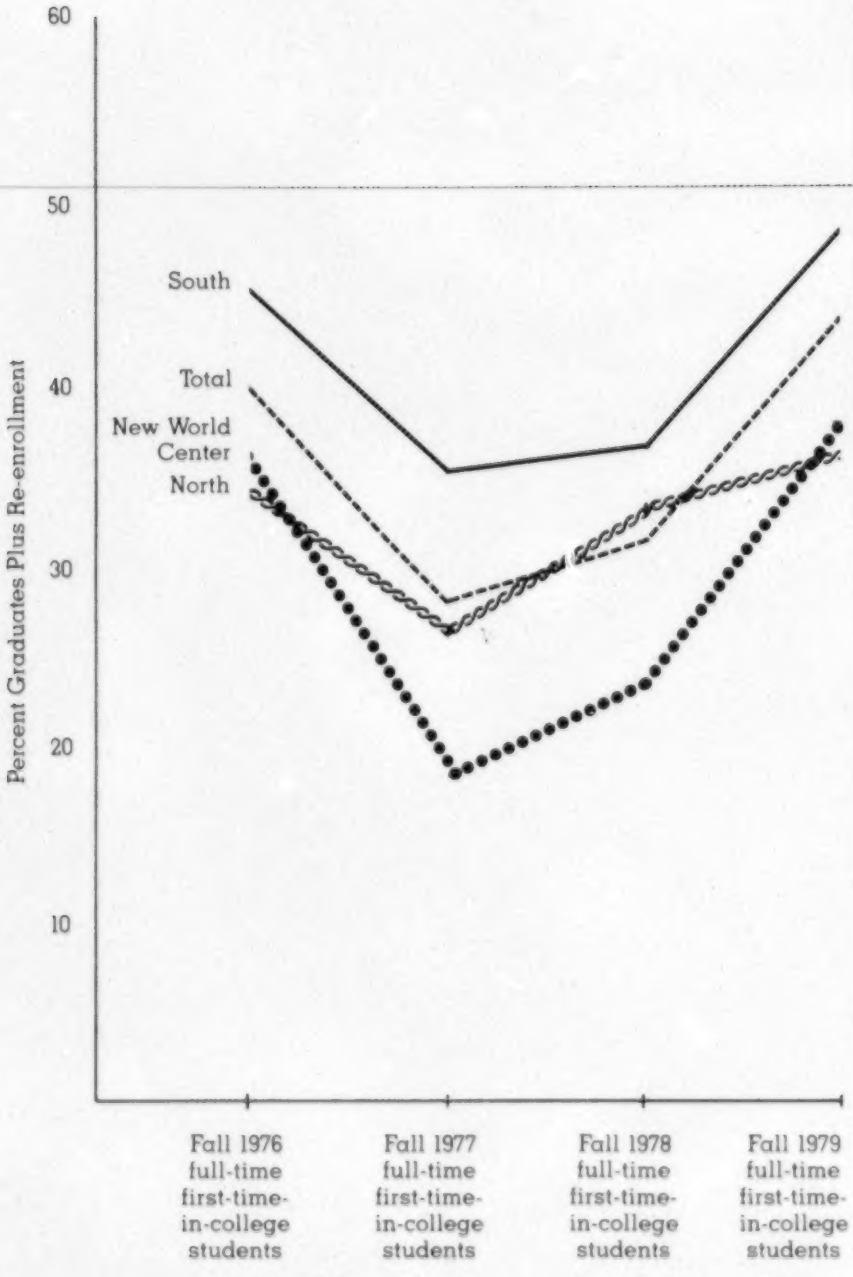
Some of the most impressive, positive impacts can be garnered from qualitative impressions in addition to the numerical information provided. Faculty, students, and staff are virtually unanimous in favoring more rigorous standards and have applauded the impact of these changes. A survey of students in remedial classes indicated that 80 percent of those responding viewed their remedial experiences positively. To a large extent, most of the changes are built on a foundation of firm knowledge of learning theory in which studies have consistently shown that students perform up to levels of expectation. Miami-Dade has raised its expectations for students over a period of the last five years, and students have responded in an accordingly positive manner. As a result of the comprehensive reform of the educational program at Miami-Dade Community College, it has already been made clear that open access can be successfully combined with quality control.

CONCLUSION

It should be recognized that this is a status report based to a large extent on empirical data gathered to date. There are some components of Miami-Dade's program reform which have not been in place sufficient time to have measurable

TABLE 5

Black Non-Hispanic
Three-Year Graduation Plus
re-enrollment Rate
First-time-in-College Students
Fall 1976, 1977, 1978, and 1979



impacts, and there are components of the reform which have not yet been assessed. However, the statistics presented here, from the skills of entering students through graduation and competitive performance in the university system, are remarkable. What is important is not the pre-entry skills of those admitted, but rather the level of competency attained by those who graduate. Studies to date have shown that students improve performance, increase completion rates and GPA, and lower suspension rates when they are informed early of deficiencies and avail themselves of needed special assistance. It is most encouraging that the more structured approaches are resulting in increased completion rates and improved student performance, and that we are beginning to have some success assisting many individuals who begin with a lack of necessary skills to reach a high level of academic achievement.

The last element of the comprehensive reform announced in 1978 was fully implemented in the Fall Term of 1982. However, planning for new changes continues, featuring a pervasive writing requirement. Our theme will be "information skills for the information age." The basic thrust of all these changes at Miami-Dade is to continue to be more directive, more supportive, and to maintain higher expectations. While there is certainly much more to be accomplished in order to fulfill the essential need for a system that provides both quality and equity, we are confident that we are on the right track to that goal.

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